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## CONTEMPORARY FRENCH POETS.

### II. DECADENTS AND SYMBOLISTS.

There is a sense in which Hugo is the father of modern French poetry, but his descendants have been less dutiful than admiring so that in the last generation he seems rather to bar the current of poetic evolution than to divert or guide it. Hugo's poetic children bear the print of his outward features, but they do not inherit his hopeful courage. Much of their work is of great beauty, and its remarkable variety is of significance in any effort to comprehend the past and to foreshadow the near future of French literary genius, and intellectual life. Yet through all, or almost all, of their writing we may trace beneath the mask of Hugo's rhetoric and prosody the spirit of Sainte-Beuve and Taine. Pessimism, violent, gloomy, sad, or frivolous and hedonistic, is the colored thread that runs through the warp and woof of *fin de siècle* verse both among the Parnassian artists for art and in the decadent or deliquescent schools of Symbolism.

The first lyric expression of Romanticism had been fundamentally egoistic and individualized. This is characteristic of Lamartine, of Hugo, and of de Musset. But as the movement spent its first force two divergent tendencies checked and modified its self-confident liberty. First the socialistic theories that we connect with the names of Fourier and Saint-Simon undermined the political basis of individualism. A discontented or at least a restless mental state succeeded to the hopeful energy of 1830 after the collapse of the Republic of 1848. This generous discontent found its reflection in the sombre, self-centred, yet purposeful poetry of de Vigny. On the other hand the æsthetic liberties of the Romantics, the wanton gambols of individualism in metre and language led inevitably to a reaction, and the exaggerated appreciation of poetic form found its completest expression in Gautier.

These two forces acted together or apart on all forms of literature, but in prose fiction they were for a time dominated by the genius of Balzac and by the scientific determinism or scepticism of Taine and Renan, and in the drama their action is obscured, at least in the strongest work, by the subordination of art to social ethics. The two tendencies appear most plainly in poetry where the traditions of de Vigny are nobly upborne by the Parnassians, while in Banville one can already trace the incipient decadence toward art for artificiality of the school of Gautier, the labored futility of whose poetry Banville best reflects in the substance of his verses, though in outward form and rhyme he illustrates and elaborates the theories of Sainte-Beuve.

In a posthumous essay Banville has described himself as a follower of the Graces of old Greece, while the contemporaries of his later years seemed to him worshippers of the newer graces, Absinthe, Nevrose, and Morphine. In claiming this classical affiliation the poet wished to class himself with those Parnassians who took Hugo for their master in prosody and rhetorical form, while in their hedonistic ethics and in their passionless objectivity they followed Gautier. The very titles of his earlier volumes<sup>1</sup> suggest their impassive nature. From the very outset he appears as a poet of a disillusioned age, a product of the corroding spirit of determinism in philosophy and the cynical materialism of the Second Empire. He shows no faith save in his senses and the joy they bring, the delight of eye and ear, the harmony of color and sound. He suffered neither anxious thought nor unreasoning passion to ruffle his serene calm.

Like Gautier, Banville wrote a great mass of critical but ephemeral feuilletons, some equally ephemeral dramas and

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<sup>1</sup> Banville was born 1823 and died 1891. *Œuvres*, 8 vols., 1873-8, and *Dernières poésies*, 1893. Chronology of the chief collections: *Cariatides*, 1842; *Stalactites*, 1846; *Odelettes*, 1856; *Odes funambulesques*, 1857; *Nouvelles odes funambulesques*, 1869; *Idyles prussiennes*, 1871. *Dramas*: *Gringoire*, 1866; *Socrate et sa femme*, 1885. *Fiction*: *Contes féeriques*,

an essay on prosody that won him the title "Legislator of Parnassus". He wrote also many prose tales, but the best of these ring false in spite of their melodious warmth, and the laxity of their morals mars the delicate grace of their style, for there is a violation of essential congruity when the characters of the "Comédie Humaine" are dressed in fairy gauze. But it is as a poet alone that Banville survives, and it is his poetry alone that merits special study. We should expect of a poet who schools himself to hide the emotions that survive his philosophy that the lyric note of personal experience would be subordinated to the feelings common to humanity or to descriptive reproductions of nature and legend as they appear in the posthumous poems of de Vigny. But in Banville the substance tends more and more with each succeeding collection to become subordinate to form, more and more rhyme becomes the chosen field for the display of his virtuosity. He revives the artificial stanzas of the fourteenth century, the rondeau, the triolet and the rest, and even betters the instruction, dancing in his "Odes funambulesques", true "Tight-rope Odes", on the wire he has stretched for his muse with an easy assurance that arouses a sort of amused admiration for these trifling *odelettes*, frivolous and fanciful, yet in their kind of great excellence.

It is no small thing in an age sicklied o'er with naturalism to preserve an inexhaustible flow of gaiety, though it be empty, to write, as Lemaitre wittily puts it, with the one idea of expressing no idea. Banville confesses ingenuously that his ambition is to ally the buffoon element to the lyric, while rigorously adhering to the form of the ode, and to obtain, as in a true lyric, his impression, comic or otherwise, by combinations of rhymes and harmonious or peculiar effects of sound. He is convinced that the musical effect of verse can awaken what it will in the reader's mind, "and even create that supernatural and divine thing, laughter",

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Scènes de la vie de Paris, 1859. Criticism: *Traité de la poésie française*, 1872. Critical articles on Banville: Lemaitre, *Contemporains*, i., 7, and *Nineteenth Century*, August, 1891.

as well as "joy, enthusiastic emotion and beauty". Thus he approaches Wagner's theory of a music drama, though our poet is more modest in his aspirations and indeed only carries to its extreme a device practised in all ages of French verse, by Villon as well as Piron, and by none more than by his favorite, Ronsard.

The gift of musical speech was his from the first. Several poems of his youthful "Cariatides" sing themselves into the ear with strange melody<sup>1</sup> and others among his satiric verses have a curious metallic quality that foreshadows his future mastery.<sup>2</sup> But the elaboration of many of the later *chants royaux* and *virelais* must always be cav-  
viare to most readers. In these wrestlings between the subject and the intricate rhyme, the former, even if like Jacob it come off victor, is almost sure to have a sinew shrivelled in the contest. Yet it is interesting to note that while this will-o'-the-wisp rhyme is leading the poet's fancy where it will, the very phantasmagoria that it evokes have their charm. Our curiosity is excited as we watch the poet winding himself out of his own labyrinth; yes, this very difficulty gives a fillip to his own imagination and at times reveals to him unexpected flowers of preciosity.

Such an art of poetry is hardly adapted to serious subjects of any kind. His satires are mocking *vers de société* or laments that pleasures must be bought that should be given.<sup>3</sup> Often his thought takes the form of parody of some popular piece or style, or, perhaps, like some busy bee of humor, he builds an elaborate fabric of formal nonsense where the wit lurks in grotesque juxtapositions, fantastic figures, serious verses upset by some impertinent bit of slang, the promise of wisdom ending in ludicrous commonplace, all clothed in teasing rhymes and lit up with countless puns. Twice only was Banville betrayed into serious emotion, not much to his poetic advantage. Toward the

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<sup>1</sup> E. g. "Confession" and the second part of the "Songe d'hiver."

<sup>2</sup> E. g. the sixth part of "Ceux qui meurent et ceux qui combattent".

<sup>3</sup> E. g. La Malédiction de Vénus.

close of the Empire the counsellors of Napoleon were made the butts for the poisoned darts of his satire, and during the siege of Paris the bitterness of unreasoning hate overflowed in his "Idylles prussiennes". But in his normal mood Banville much prefers Greek mythology to modern politics<sup>1</sup> and finds his favorite subjects in the Renaissance or in the picturesque aspects of literary and artistic Bohemia. The gaiety of nocturnal Paris tricked out in its gauzy span-gles has also its charm for him, and so indeed has anything that is quite aside from the every-day life and duties of Philistia, for which, as for its laureate Scribe, he had a deep and life-long aversion.

Here he is most at home, and paints exquisite pictures whose clear-cut outlines rival the brilliancy of their color, whose every phrase thrills with the joy of art and beauty.<sup>2</sup> He is more the artist for art than even Gautier, for he has not a trace of that *arrière pensée* of death that haunts the mediævalized mind of the author of "Albertus". Indeed, Banville is the most thorough pagan of all the moderns, light-hearted even to his septuagenarian end, and leaving behind him as the sum of his ephemeral wisdom the beneficent lines :

La planète est vieille, mais  
Comme la jeune fille est jeune.

Banville's easy cheerfulness, his unruffled optimism that

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<sup>1</sup> E. g. *La Voie lactée*, *Clymène*, *Le Jugement de Paris*. The last is the most elaborate, but all are frigid.

<sup>2</sup> E. g. among descriptive pieces, *L'Exil des dieux*, *Le Banquet des dieux*, *Le Sanglier*, *Le Mort d'amour*, *La Fleur de sang*, *La Rose*; among the humorous and gay, *Eldorado*, *En habit zinzolin*, and the *Odelette à Méry*; as a model of metrical art the last four lines of *Carmen* :

Il faut à l'hexamètre, ainsi qu'aux purs arceaux  
Des églises du nord et des palais arabes,  
Le calme pour pouvoir dérouler les anneaux  
Saints et mystérieux de ses douze syllabes.

Noteworthy also are the ten lines that immediately follow, beginning :

Nous n'irons plus aux bois, les lauriers sont coupés.

persistently closed its eyes to more than half of life, will account for the comparative neglect of his verses in a time more conscious of its faults than of its power to overcome them, an age that has found truer representatives of the nobler aspects of its pessimism in the Parnassians, who face the ills of life with the dignified reserve and stoic calm of the philosophic mind. Since these are the poetic expressions of an earlier phase of the national spirit they may justly claim the precedence that has been accorded them in these articles. But beside this noble unrest there is an ignoble restlessness, and this morbid decadent tendency found an early and intense expositor in Banville's unfortunate friend Charles Baudelaire, the progenitor of the modern Symbolists, in whom we find the poetic expression of a state of weary yet restless reaction from the confidence of scientific determinism, a sort of literary hyper-æsthesia, rising at times to a real emotional hysteria. It is from him, the most melancholy of the adepts of shudder and woe, that Verlaine and his fellows have drawn the solvent poison of their fascination. It is only through understanding him that we shall understand them; and it is worth while to understand them, not so much for what they are as for what they promise and indicate.

Baudelaire<sup>1</sup> was a Parisian and two years the senior of Banville. A voyage to India in his youth left a deep impress on his mind that is reflected in the imagery, the colors, and the odors of his poetry. His uneventful literary career began with critical articles in Parisian journals that at the time attracted little attention, but seem now to show remarkable keenness and foresight, so that, as Brunetière observes, they deserve to be "read, reread, and retained" (*Poésie lyrique*, ii. 139). However the first of his works to exercise strong influence on his contemporaries was his trans-

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<sup>1</sup> Born 1831, died 1867. *Fleurs du mal*, 1857, and with a preface by Gautier, 1868. Criticism: Bourget, *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* i. 3, Lemaitre, *Contemporains*, iv. 17, Pellissier, *Mouvement littéraire*, 279, Lanson, *Littérature*, 1034. See also *Fortnightly Review*, June, 1891.

lation of Poe's tales in 1856. This was followed in the next year by a volume of poems under the strange title "Flowers of Evil," six of which were such rank blossoms as to be condemned by the squeamish censors of the Second Empire. But not even this advertisement aroused any general interest in the book during the lifetime of the author. Indeed the tide did not turn till after the German war, but it has since set so steadily that work which he himself would probably have rejected has been gathered into a posthumous volume (1887).

The important place that is now accorded to these "Flowers of Evil" is partly due to their anticipation of a morbid pessimism, more common now than in his day, and partly no doubt to the warm appreciation with which Gautier returned the dedication to him of the "Fleurs du mal" as to "the impeccable poet" in a long essay prefixed to the edition of 1868. This appreciation was however too tardy to bring any balm to Baudelaire's perturbed spirit, for he had already died in a hospital after a year of semi-lunacy, induced, at least in part, by the excessive use of nervous stimulants. Perhaps this was the end that he would have desired, for he tells us that "he cultivated hysteria with delight and terror".

To Baudelaire nature seems evil and so all that is natural becomes hateful. If, like Gautier, he is haunted by visions of death, he does not shrink from them. Rather does he take a mournful pleasure in sensations of decay and corruption, believing, like that old nihilist Mephistopheles, that all is worthy of perishing. How far this pessimism is sincere, how far it is perverse, is hard to determine. Certainly in his expression of it there is much that is forced and intentionally brutal, together with passages of curious idealism, that seem like the lees of the Romantic wine, "the last convulsion of expiring individualism". "Oh death", he exclaims:

Pour out thy poison that it may comfort us,  
We wish, so much this fire burns our brains



To plunge to the gulf's bottom, heaven, hell, what reck we?  
To the bottom of the unknown to find the new.<sup>1</sup>

Baudelaire clothes his weird subjects in a form more restrained and within its own limits almost as masterly as Hugo's. He sought his vocabulary largely in the Latin poets of the decadence and defended his choice with his wonted perversity, as "singularly fitted to express passion such as the modern world understood and felt it". "If his bouquet is composed of strange flowers, metallic colors, and heady perfumes . . . he can reply that hardly any others grow in this black soil, saturated with the decay of corruption, like the cemetery sod of decrepit civilizations in which are dissolving amid mephitic miasmas the corpses of foregone centuries."<sup>2</sup>

The first "Flower" in Baudelaire's garden gives the reader fair warning, for it assures us that we are all "hypocritical slaves" of ennui "most ugly, fierce, unclean in the infamous menagerie of our vices". This thought he develops in the 107 poems of "Spleen and Ideal" where shuddering at the vileness of life alternates with aspirations for a serene emancipation from it that the poet has not the strength of will to attain. Throughout, the imagery is less of the eye than of touch and odors. There is an East-Indian sensitiveness to perfumes. Some seem to him fresh, some green as nature, some proud, some fierce, some purifying. Again and again he recurs to their intoxicating fascination, which they share with cats to whom are especially dedicated three poems (pp. 135, 161, 189) which it is curious to compare with Taine's sonnet to his favorite cat, a type,

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<sup>1</sup> O Mort . . . .

Verse-nous ton poison pour qu'il nous réconforte !  
Nous voulons, tant ce feu nous brûle le cerveau,  
Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe ?  
Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du *nouveau*.

(p. 351, edition of 1892, from which all paged citations are hereafter made.)  
Cp. also his Poem in Prose, "N'importe où hors du monde", and in the "Fleurs", numbers lxxviii-lxxx., xc., cli., 8.

<sup>2</sup> Gautier, Preface (freely translated).

says M. Monod, of his own softened, reasonable stoicism. Baudelaire's intense imagination pictures these disdainers of their masters as they haunt the darkness with their phosphorescent eyes and electric skins, and he finds a charm in their silent movements and their mysterious treachery. Indeed, as Gautier wittily observes, "Baudelaire himself was a voluptuous cat, with velvety ways and mysterious manner, delicate, caressing, supple, strong, fixing on things and men a gaze of disquieting brightness, free, willful, difficult to restrain, but without perfidy and faithfully attached to those to whom he had once offered his sympathy". Baudelaire's tabbies are worthy companions of Gray's "pensive Selima." But it must be admitted that his women are less pleasing. True "flowers of evil", all are corrupt, insatiable, incapable of love, instruments of degradation and torture; all save the unattainable Beatrix of his poet's vision.<sup>1</sup>

Many of these poems are strong and some are beautiful, but their beauty is awful, grewsome, satanic. Less forced is the pessimism of his "Parisian Pictures," several of which are in lighter and more sympathetic vein, and some mere airy fantasies. Of them all, perhaps that which clings most to the mind is "Les Petites vieilles", the wretched wrecks of a youth too gay, who bear with them always some pathetic token of the primrose path on their stony descent to the grave. Five poems on wine that follow bring us back to a morose ferocity, that rises to delirious intensity in "Le Vin de l' assassin," the inebriate murderer who rejoices that his wife is dead because now he can drink his fill without being racked by her reproachful cries.<sup>2</sup> Noteworthy among later

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most noted pieces in "Spleen et Idéal" are: "Bénédiction", a morbid picture of the torture of his poet's life, "La Vie antérieure", a vision of Indian serenity, wealth, and perfume that cannot still his languishing secret grief, "Don Juan aux enfers", impassive and impenitent, and "Une Charogne", whose gastly subject, a putrefying corpse, has maintained for forty years its bad eminence as the most horrible poem in the language.

<sup>2</sup> Ma femme est morte, je suis libre ;  
Je puis donc boire tout mon souï.  
Lorsque je rentrais sans un sou  
Ses cris me déchiraient la fibre.

poems is the Dantesque imagery of "Femmes damnées" and the melancholy ferocity of "Les Deux bonnes sœurs", debauchery and death, "whose ever virgin flanks, draped in rags, travail in eternal fruitlessness".<sup>1</sup> But perhaps the climax of the whole is reached in his "Revolt", where beneath this demoniacal galling the poet becomes so possessed by the spirit of evil as to conceive the heritage of Satan to be the noblest aspiration of the human soul. A few lines may not be without interest as illustrations of this curious mental aberration :

Verily, as for me I will leave content  
A world where deed is not sister of thought.  
May I use the sword and perish by the sword.  
Saint Peter denied Jesus . . . He did well.

Again he bids "the race of Cain ascend to heaven and cast God down to earth" and finally closes his satanic and superb "Litany to Satan" with these words :

Glory and praise to thee, Oh Satan, in the highest  
Heaven where once thou reignedst and in the depths  
Of hell where vanquished thou in silence dream'st.  
Beneath the tree of knowledge let my soul  
Repose by thee that day when o'er thy brow  
Like a new house of God its branches shall extend.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dont le flanc toujours vierge et drapé de guenilles  
Sous l'éternel labeur n'a jamais enfanté.

<sup>2</sup> Certes, je sortirai, quant à moi, satisfait  
D'un monde où l'action n'est pas la sœur du rêve  
Puissé-je user du glaive et périr par le glaive :  
Saint Pierre a renié Jésus . . . il a bien fait !  
. . . . .

Race de Cain au ciel monte  
Et sur la terre jette Dieu.  
. . . . .

Gloire et louange à toi, Satan, dans les hauteurs  
Du Ciel où tu régnas, et dans les profondeurs  
De l'Enfer, où, vaincu, tu rêves en silence !  
Fais que mon âme un jour, sous l'Arbre de Science  
Près de toi se repose, à l'heure, où sur ton front  
Comme un Temple nouveau ses rameaux s'épanouiront.

This is an obvious climax and with a short katabasis on Death, where "from top to bottom of the fatal ladder" the poet discerns only "the weary spectacle of immortal sin"<sup>1</sup> the "*Fleurs du mal*" come to their wild end.

These 151 poems are short, compactly built, and carefully polished in their laborious moral paradoxes, like fungus growths, or noxious bacilli, that find in this rich brain their natural nidus and full nourishment. His prose works furnish an herbarium of equally startling exotic flowers and give a clew to the botany of this literary genus. In his "*Fusées*" we may read that the supreme and unique joy of love lies in the certainty of doing injury. All joy is based on evil", a topsy-turvy notion by no means original with Baudelaire for it had been preached with equal perversity some decades before he was born by the Marquis de Sade.<sup>2</sup> In this spirit he defines a young girl as the being that "unites the greatest imbecility to the greatest depravity" and thinks the very worst charge against woman to be that "she is natural, that is to say abominable". After this one is prepared for his avowal: "It has always seemed to me horrible to be a useful man".

All this is not only the contradiction of common sentiment but of common sense. Yet though Baudelaire himself warns us that "a little of the charlatan is always permissible to genius" he seems to have schooled himself into a certain sincerity of self-contradiction, worshipping Satan while he clung to Catholicism, and becoming toward the close of his life morosely ascetic in resolution and extravagantly hedonistic in action. He united three discordant elements: the philosophy of science, the ethics of materialism, and the mysticism, though not the faith, of mediæval demonology. That is to say, in his theory and in his practice he was a de-

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<sup>1</sup> Du haut jusques en bas de l'échelle fatale  
Le spectacle ennuyeux de l'immortel péché.

<sup>2</sup> The curious may consult Jules Blais, *Satanisme*, 1895, with a preface by the novelist, Huysmans. Among the novels of de Sade "*Justine*" is perhaps sufficiently characteristic.

cadent, one who put his new wine into an old bottle, a man out of place in his social environment, and so tending, as science tells us that all misplaced organic matter does, to disintegration.<sup>1</sup>

This contradiction in the poet's mind is reflected in his work. The new and the old, Romanticism and Naturalism, dwell in him side by side, spiritual ideals with putrefying corpses, the most diseased sensuality with the most exalted asceticism, or in his own words, "ecstasy of life and disgust of life". He hates woman with a mystic mediæval hatred, and in spite of this, or because of it, he unites a passionate cult to his bitter contempt, as though he were trying to realize that complete debauchery of the will, which reasons that since what is natural is evil what is artificial must be virtuous and good. But this is pessimism reduced to the absurd, just as the same doctrine in æsthetics is the reduction to the absurd of art.

This state of mind has long ceased to be exceptional. Deep discontent with the social order, if not with the moral order of the world is almost a sign of the times. In politics it shows itself in nihilistic, anarchic, and socialistic dreams; Schopenhauer's popularity reflects it in philosophy, while in literature Hardy in England, Sudermann in Germany, and Maupassant in France typify our moral unrest. But this is as much as to say that Baudelaire's æsthetics are a house built on sand, that his efforts and those of his followers are foredoomed to an impotent and lame conclusion. There can be no lasting fame for decadence. And yet the work of this forerunner has an exquisitely poisonous originality that preserves his memory as in arsenic green. Who before him ever sang with such perverse genius that health was disgusting, that enamel and rice powder were lovelier than red cheeks, that the odors of the laboratory were purer than those of the garden, and that no hues of life were so fair as those of phosphorescent decay? Madame de Staël, for all her theory of progress, hesitated to prefer Latin

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<sup>1</sup> Cp. Bourget, l. c. 24, for a discussion of the philosophy of decadence.

literature to Greek, but Baudelaire did not shrink from proclaiming that Petronius was superior to Virgil. He would have for his muse "no matron repulsive in her healthy virtue". Artificiality, formal elaboration, "the absolute expression", the union of harmony and melody, of form and tone, was his Sisyphean ambition, as it had been that of Banville, whom in his minor key Baudelaire equalled and perhaps surpassed. It is said that he carried this endeavor even into the modulations of his conversation, rejoicing in the music of his own voice.<sup>1</sup> This instinct enabled him to anticipate the long contested verdict of the Wagnerian tone-drama, so that even before that composer had obtained a sympathetic hearing in his native Germany, Paris had listened incredulously to the enthusiastic appreciation of this father of the decadents who was indeed precisely suited to sympathize with the author of *Parzival*.<sup>2</sup>

Baudelaire's genius is unhealthy, and unfortunately disease is more contagious than health. The robust sentiment of Hugo finds but a faint echo on Parnassus, while from the putrescent hot-bed of the "Fleurs du mal" there has sprung a rank and pestiferous growth of poison plants that have shed the winged seeds of literary disorganization and morbid psychology over our strange *fin de siècle* generation. These noxious germs have been powerfully aided in their development by some foreign results of similar causes. The Russian novelists, the English painters, the German composers have combined to undermine the power of the clear scientific spirit of Taine and to cultivate in enervated minds the diathesis of indefinite mysticism that finds its present expression in the Symbolists.

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<sup>1</sup> His reading of poetry aloud seems to have produced a very deep impression on the finest minds of his generation, among them Stendhal, Gautier, Hugo, Flaubert, Banville, Leconte de Lisle, and Delacroix, to whom Baudelaire was most loyal in friendship and generous in critical appreciation.

<sup>2</sup> Brunetière, *Poésie lyrique* ii. 241. The relation is urged, with grotesque exaggeration, in Nordau's "Degeneration"; but this and the following paragraph were written before the author had seen that flimsy fancy.

Determinist philosophy and analytical science, that for a time held high carnival and undisputed sway in French fiction and obtained a more sober recognition in the drama, won foothold in the lyric poetry of the Parnassians only by compromise. And so it was natural that the reaction against the positivist, scientific spirit should manifest itself here first and most strongly. Symbolism, stripped of its antic garb, is an effort to reestablish the place of metaphysical thought in poetry. It has been usually a misdirected effort, but though the attempt has failed it has its eternal justification in the unsolvable mystery of nature. Indeed a certain symbolism is consistent with, or perhaps one should rather say, inherent in, complete naturalism. For, as Brunetière happily puts it, the Symbolists have no other origin than the profoundly human need of making abstractions cognizable by materializing them, and no other excuse for being than to manifest physically to all what is spiritually accessible only to few. Thus Symbolism becomes metaphysics manifested by images and made sensible to the heart. But one of the conditions of a true symbol is that it shall be clear, and that the work of the Symbolists obviously is not. Hence it is what this school indicates and what it promises rather than what it realizes, that gives interest to the somewhat incoherent utterances of these the most direct descendents in the poetic family of Baudelaire. For in times past these are the conditions that have preceded poetic revivals.<sup>1</sup> But if from this point of view all these vagrants of genius have their attraction, one only has the divine breath of which Horace speaks, and he is the greatest vagrant of them all, the discharged prisoner and social outcast, Paul Verlaine.

The resemblance of this true poet to Baudelaire is less like to like than like in difference. It has indeed been said that Baudelaire invented a new shudder and Verlaine a new woe, but personally there is a closer parallel between Verlaine and Villon, for both were Bohemians by preference

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Brunetière, *Poésie lyrique*, ii. 229, and *Littérature contemporaine*, 155.

rather than by necessity, and both cultivated eccentricity in their lives and in their verses. This interest in form for its own sake allies Verlaine also to the Parnassians, but from that company his spirit that brooked no rule soon parted. Before the German war he had published three collections of verse, then for eleven years he vanished from the surface of society, but reappeared in 1881 with "*Sagesse*", since which he has led a vagabond life between workhouses, cafés, and hospices, publishing frequent volumes of verse and occasional articles in the critical reviews.<sup>3</sup>

The first verses of Verlaine suggest the somewhat earlier poems of Baudelaire and Leconte de Lisle and betray also the influence of Edgar Poe. Already in "*La Fête galante*" one finds traces of that delight in phraseology, in the concord of sweet sounds, that grew on him through each succeeding volume, until far from "chiseling words like cups", as he said and supposed, he came to rely more and more for his effects on sonorousness, sentiment, and a mysterious obscurity that resists exact analysis and quite defies translation, which may indeed indicate the mental state of the writer but can give no idea of his instinct for melody. To take but a single instance from his first collection, the "*Poèmes saturnines*". One need only read aloud this "*Chanson d'automne*" to feel its exquisite melody:

Les sanglots longs  
Des violons  
De l'automne  
Blessent mon cœur  
D'une langueur  
Monotone.  
  
Tout suffoquant  
Et blême, quand  
Sonne l'heure

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<sup>3</sup> The chronology of the chief volumes of Verlaine is: *Poèmes saturnines*, 1867; *La Fête galante*, 1868; *La Bonne chanson*, 1870; *Sagesse*, 1881; *Jadis et Naguère*, 1883; *Parallèlement*, 1885; *Mes Hôpitaux*, 1891. A convenient anthology of his poetry is contained in *Choix de poésies de Paul Verlaine* (Charpentier, 1892). Criticism: Lemaitre, *Contemporains*, iv. 60, Brunetière, ii. 243, *Fortnightly Review*, March, 1891 (Delille).



Je me souviens  
Des jours anciens  
Et je pleurs.

Et je m'en vais  
Au vent mauvais  
Qui m'emporte  
Deçà, delà  
Pareil à la  
Feuille morte.

But if we translate this we shall see how far its charm is independent of its thought. Take away timbre and rhyme and there is not much reason left in "The long sobs of the violins of Autumn, wound my heart with a monotonous langor. Suffocating and pale when sounds the hour, I remember ancient days and I weep, and I am borne along on the cruel wind that carries me hither and thither like a dead leaf." And here is a picture of Paris, exquisite to the ear but mere midsummer madness to the logical mind :

La lune plaquait ses teintes de zinc  
Par angles obtus;  
Des bouts de fumée en forme de cinq  
Sortaient drus et noirs des hauts toits pointus  
. . . . .  
Moi j'allais rêvant du divin Platon  
Et de Phidias  
Et de Salamine et de Marathon  
Sous l'œil clignotant des bleus becs de gaz.

Who ever noticed as he walked at night in a Paris street the shape of the smoke wreaths from the then absolutely invisible chimney pots? Who ever noticed bright moonlight shadows on a flaringly lighted city sidewalk? And why, finally, should Verlaine or anybody else think of Plato and Pheidias and Salamis and Marathon on a Parisian boulevard, unless indeed he be a mental degenerate?

And yet the eye may grow impatient of images that it cannot see and the mind of phantom thoughts that elude its grasp, but the man who has music in his soul will be won back ever again by the indefinable charm of this faun-like genius. There are however degrees in his eccentricity, and

he who is not to the manor born will find the "Fête galante" and the "Bonne chanson" the most accessible of Verlaine's volumes. It is true that these delicate little trifles savor sometimes of that intertwining of sentiment and sensuousness that characterized the poetry of the eighteenth century, but they are full of the loveliness of a studied artificiality, much of the charm of which depends on the literary culture of the reader. To catch the grace of "L'Allée" or of "Columbine" one must know a little of Parny and much of Watteau, for the former poem is a Dresden shepherdess in *fin de siècle* alexandrines and the latter is her joyous companion in a song measure that might have charmed Banville himself. The love ditties of the "Bonne chanson" are simpler and so have a more perennial attractiveness. Some of these little songs sing themselves so to the heart that it seems a sort of literary sacrilege to attempt to translate them into prose or limping verses. But does not this speak for itself:

La lune blanche,  
Luit dans les bois;  
De chaque branche  
Part une voix  
Sous la ramée . . .  
Oh bien aimée.

L'étang reflète  
Profond miroir  
La silhouette  
Du saule noir  
Où le vent pleure . . .  
Rêvons: c'est l'heure.

Un vaste et tendre  
Apaisement  
Semble descendre  
Du firmament  
Que l'astre irise . . .  
C'est l'heure exquise.

The years that separated "La Bonne chanson" from "La Sagesse" intensified both the strength and the weakness of Verlaine's character. The contradictions of his

nature became even more startling than those of Baudelaire. Here the poet of the "Fêtes galantes" and the future author of "Parallèlement" proclaimed with agonized sincerity and the most intensely Catholic devotion, that the Jesuits were the hope of social morals, and that Moses was the only scientist, while even the good old times when "Maintenon cast on raptured France the shadow and the peace of her linen caps" are hardly orthodox enough for the convert's enthusiasm, and he prefers to those halcyon days of Gallicism the Middle Ages with "their high theology and firm morals"<sup>1</sup> In these verses his exalted faith holds converse with God and Christ as none since Thomas à Kempis has done, and hymns the glories of Mary in verses unsurpassed in French. Penitence has rarely reached a more intense lyric expression than in that series of sonnets where God and the sinner reason together in verses that have been called by a great modern critic "the first in French poetry that express truly the love of God." Yet these are equalled, and in a way excelled, by an exquisite hymn to the Virgin and other poems that reach the extreme intensity of self-renunciation.<sup>2</sup> But even in Verlaine's "Sagesse" there are pieces as hard to set in order as a Chinese puzzle,<sup>3</sup> for Catholicism had not weaned him from the idolatry of words, and he was presently to show in his pitifully curious "Parallèlement" that it had not weaned him, any more than the same Catholic aspirations had done Baudelaire, from an at-

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<sup>1</sup> C'est vers le Moyen Age énorme et délicat,  
Qu'il faudrait que mon cœur en panne naviguât

Haute théologie et solide morale  
Guidé par la folie unique de la Croix.

(From "Non. Il fut gallican", but compare "Sagesse d'un Louis Racine.")

<sup>2</sup> The sonnets begin "Mon Dieu m'a dit"; the hymn to Mary, "Je ne veux plus aimer". Cp. also, "O mon Dieu vous m'avez blessé d'amour". All these are in the "Choix de poésies," pp. 159-190.

<sup>3</sup> E. g. "L'Espoir luit comme un brin de paille dans l'étable," which is ingeniously unravelled by Lemaitre, l. c. 99.

tempt to combine the worship of God with that of the devil, in what is indeed a melancholy parallel.

The poetry that follows "Sagesse" grows steadily more incoherent and uneven, so that it is impossible to speak of progress or retrogression from volume to volume, while in each there are striking groups and single poems. Perhaps his strongest recent work has been in political and social satire. In a ballad dedicated to Luise Michel he defines the Republican leaders as "perverted talent, megatherium or bacillus, raw soldier, insolent shyster (*robin*), or some brittle compromise, giant of mud with feet of clay."<sup>1</sup> But if the government delights him not, neither does Paris, that "glaring pile of white stone, where the sun rages as in a conquered country, where all vices, the exquisite and the hideous, have their lair, a desert of white stone."<sup>2</sup> Some of the realistic pictures of tavern and street in the workmen's wards are gems in their way, though their brilliancy is more that of the cat's eye or the moon-stone than that of the diamond or the emerald. Here is a single example among many:<sup>3</sup>

The noise of the wineshop, the mud of the walk,  
Sickly trees shedding leaves in the dusky air,  
The omnibus, tempest of iron and mud,  
That creaks ill balanced between its four wheels  
And slowly rolls its eyes, red and green;

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<sup>1</sup> Gouvernements de maltalent,  
Mégarthérium ou bacille  
Soldat brut, robin insolent,  
Ou quelque compromise fragile,  
Géant de boue aux pieds d'argile.

<sup>2</sup> La "grande ville." Un tas criard de pierres blanches  
Où rage le soleil comme en pays conquis.  
Tous les vices ont leur tanière, les exquis  
Et les hideux, dans ce désert de pierres blanches.

<sup>3</sup> Le bruit du cabaret, la fange du trottoir  
Les plantanes déchus s'effeuillant dans l'air noir,  
L'omnibus, ouragan de ferailles et de boue  
Qui grince, mal assis entre ses quatre roues,  
Et roule ses yeux verts et rouges lentement;  
Les ouvriers allant au club, tout en fumant

Workmen going to the club while they smoke  
 Their cutty-pipes under the gendarmes' nose,  
 Roofs dripping, walls oozing, and pavement that slips,  
 Broken asphalt and gutters overflowing the sewer,  
 Behold my road — with paradise at the end.

Then there are among these verses fantastic bits of *diablerie* that suggest opium dreams. There is a weird fascination in the high festival of the satans at Ecbatana, where they "make litter of their five senses for the seven sins" and at last attempt "to maintain the balance in their duel with God by sacrificing hell to universal love".<sup>1</sup> Another of these "twilight pieces", as Verlaine grimly calls them, represents a countess in prison holding in her lap the head of her husband, whom she has killed in a fit of jealousy while he was in mortal sin. The head speaks to tell her that he loves her still and to bid her "Damn thyself that we be not parted". "Pity, pity! my God", she shrieks, and by that prayer is torn from her lover to paradise, to discover, like another of these incarnations of passion, that "hell is absence".

Such conceptions are the sign of an unbalanced mind, of which many traces can be found in other poems whose rhythm has the capricious beauty of a hashish dream and, like our English "Kubla-Khan", defies the analysis of the rhetorician. An instance of this is afforded by his "Art poétique", which has a double interest because it both illustrates and characterizes the aspirations of the decadent school, though they write their best poetry when they are recreant to it. It may not be without interest, therefore, to translate as well as may be the sense, or what seems to be

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Leur brûle-gueule au nez des agents de police,  
 Toits qui dégoûtent, murs suintants, pavé qui glisse,  
 Bitume défoncé, ruisseaux comblant l'égout;  
 Voilà ma route — avec le paradis au bout.

<sup>1</sup> "Crimen amoris" (Choix de poésies, p. 259).

Font litière aux sept péchés de leurs cinq sens.

En maintenant l'équilibre de ce duel,  
 Par moi l'Enfer dont c'est ici le repaire  
 Se sacrifie à l'Amour universel!

the sense, of a few stanzas, laboring to be literal, though with the certainty of remaining obscure: "Music before everything; therefore choose the unequal, more vague, more soluble in air, with nothing in it that has weight or pose. Then, too, you must not go choose your words without some fault. Nothing is dearer than the gray song, where the indefinite joins the precise . . . For shade is still our desire, not color, only shade. Oh! shade, sole reliance. Dream to the dream, and flute to the horn."<sup>1</sup>

What this last line may mean I cannot conjecture, nor perhaps Verlaine either, for a little later he adds this counsel: "Let thy verse be good luck scattered on the crisped wind of the morning that reeks of mint and thyme . . . And all the rest is literature."<sup>2</sup> Which is merely Verlaine's recognition of the fact that to him words are more than ideas, style more than matter; and though this is contrary to any true symbolism in poetry, it is true in a large measure of the verses of many decadents who have allowed themselves to be called Symbolists though they have been more appropriately described by Verlaine himself as "Cymbalists".

Of this group the men who have attracted the most attention are the Greek Moréas, the Americans, Merrill and

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<sup>1</sup> De la musique avant toute chose,  
Et, pour cela, préfère l'Impair  
Plus vague, plus soluble dans l'air,  
Sans rien en lui qui pèse ou qui pose.

Il faut ainsi que tu n'aïlles point  
Choisir tes mots sans quelque méprise:  
Rien de plus cher que la chanson grise  
Où l'Indécis au Précis se joint.

Car nous voulons la Nuance encor, —  
Pas la Couleur, rien que la nuance!  
Oh! la nuance seule fiancée,  
Le rêve au rêve et la flûte au cor.

<sup>2</sup> Que ton vers soit la bonne aventure  
Epars au vent crispé du matin  
Qui va fleurant la menthe et le thym . . .  
Et tout le reste est littérature

Viellé-Griffin, the Belgian dramatist, Mæterlinck, and the Frenchmen, Ghil, Mallarmé and, probably most talented of them all, de Regnier. These poets undertake, or profess to undertake, to express essentially poetic sentiments indirectly by far-fetched metaphors or even by the sound of words and letters quite independently of their received signification. Thus Ghil tells us that "*a* is black, *e* white, *i* blue, *o* red, and *u* yellow", while another theorist of onomatopœia, Rimbaud, indignantly avers that any decadent ought to know that "*i* is red, *o* blue, and *u* green". Not content with this they have discovered a preëstablished harmony between vowel sounds and musical instruments: "*a* is the organ, *e* the harp, *i* the violin, *o* the trumpet, and *u* the flute". Or again "*a* is monotony, *e* serenity, *i* passion and prayer, *o* glory, and *u* the ingenuous smile", though not because that is what might naturally end such an *ars poetica*, for the diphthongs have their significance also and even combinations of vowel and consonant are not neglected in the Symbolist Rimbaud's "Gradus ad Parnassum".<sup>1</sup>

Verlaine does not go to these extremes, nor do any but the mountebanks among the Symbolists follow this will-o'-the-wisp except to attract attention or show their virtuosity. But Verlaine is always a poet of impulse or instinct, and is only just to himself when he asserts<sup>2</sup> that verse is to him a spontaneous expression of feeling, conscious of no literary tradition and developing no consecutive thought. Hence comes his indifference to the consecrated literary usages of words. They have not the same meaning for him that they would have to a poet of literary training, and yet his ear delights in them. As Lemaitre suggests, it is as though he had entered the Parnassian Cénacle, had listened to those tuneful disciples of art for art, and then had left their company "intoxicated by the music of their words, but by their music alone." The same writer concludes his delicate, sympathetic, yet searching diagnosis of this morbid spirit

<sup>1</sup> Cp. Rimbaud, *Traité du verbe*, and Brunetière, *Poésie lyrique*, ii. 243.

<sup>2</sup> Cp. Huret, *L'Enquête littéraire*.

with the antithetically balanced judgment: "Verlaine has the senses of a sick man, but the soul of a child, he has a naïve charm in his unhealthy languor, he is a decadent who has in him most of the primitive man".

Like Baudelaire and like Banville, Verlaine and the decadents more or less closely related to him suffer from a morbid singularity, the overstimulation of individualism inherited from the bankruptcy of Romanticism. Hence the line of their development would naturally be lyric poetry. But to those who are anxiously watching the signs in the literary heavens there seems small promise in this school of any permanent advance in the art or mechanism of song. They stand for reaction from the coldly formal objectivity of the Parnassians and their value to the next generation will probably seem to be that they reasserted the rightful place in lyric poetry of individuality and idealism. For this they will be remembered while their licenses in language and rhythm will be sooner forgotten than forgiven.

B. W. WELLS.